

MADHYA PRADESH FORESTS REVISITED¹

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(With a plate)

In the recent cold weather of 1980-81 I spent two months in India for part of the time as a guest of the Forest Departments of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. I had come out after 25 years retirement to re-visit the Forests in which I had worked since 1926, naturally my wife and I looked forward to renewing our acquaintance with the beautiful and engaging bird population of the plains of India.

On our first morning in Delhi in the attractively placed International Centre and the adjacent Lodi Gardens, we were reminded at once how beautiful are many of the commonest birds. Who can deny the thrill of seeing their first flock of parrakeets, flashing in the sunlight and hearing their exuberant calls? Or the perkiness of the Mynahs as they strut about your feet? How smart the White Breasted Kingfisher is and how good to relish again the wicked and predatory look of the crows, how commonplace to the native, how delightful to the returning visitor!

In 1956 I had contributed an article⁴ published in the *Journal* of the Bombay Natural History Society recording my observations of the birds of the old Central Provinces for the 29 years I had served in the state. As we journeyed south from Delhi to Bhopal, the Satpura Forests and on to Nagpur and then to Chanda and the Melghat, we kept a record of the

birds seen and clearly identified. As we were mostly taken about by the Forest Department who were eager to show their work, we did not have time to walk about a great deal in the forest and as we were usually accompanied by a number of Forest Officers we did not have the leisure to walk quietly and to sit down and listen to the bird calls which is one of the best ways to find out what birds are present. I had made the point in my article that after years of short rainfall such as 1951-53 the bird population was very reduced particularly of the insect eating birds. I understand that in the last 10 years there have been years of deficient rainfall, the most recent being 1978, and that the rains finished abruptly in 1980. The cold weather was also the time when there were fewer birds in Central India both by species and numbers. So our record of birds seen is only of small scientific value but may have some interest as one man's view after 25 years of absence.

One of the birds I looked forward to seeing particularly was the Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher (*Leucocirca aureola* Lesson) recorded by me in 1958 "as one of the commonest and most widely spread birds of the state found in all places where there are some trees and woody growth". I had always enjoyed its grace and the cheerful dancing motions which perhaps have a biological purpose

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³ The author was the last serving British forest officer in India after Independence. He retired in

1955 as Chief Conservator of Forests of the former 'Central Provinces'—Eds.

⁴ Observations on the bird life of Madhya Pradesh. Vol. 53(4): 595-645.

but to humans an added and aesthetic pleasure. We did not see a single specimen in all our travels and one wonders whether this was a chance failure or less the bird become rare or extinct in part of its range? We saw the allied species the Whitespotted Fantail (*R. pectoralis*) on three occasions, once in a deep ravine on the Pachmarhi Plateau, once in Allapalli and once in the Melghat but this was in line with my previous observations that it was a species of deep forest.

Another of the colourful and fascinating common birds, the Blue Jay or Roller was not recorded until we were well into Madhya Pradesh and I feared this was another species on the decline but subsequently we saw it in normal numbers.

On the other hand many of the other common species were seen in great numbers. Wherever we went in the forest we saw numerous families of Jungle Babbler and the Common Babbler in more open country. Common Mynahs were everywhere, and at places we saw great numbers of the Spotted Dove and the Ring Dove. Particularly at the Bharatpur Sanctuary and round Delhi one could quite see why the Ring Dove had found it expedient to move out and colonise Europe. Two other birds which we saw everywhere and in good numbers were the Magpie Robin, even in the Forest, and the Indian Robin.

The game birds are a group of birds which have benefitted from the high price of cartridges and the end of prestige shooting parties. That Bharatpur should have become an internationally famous sanctuary is evident to anyone fortunate enough to visit it, but elsewhere wherever we went we could see large parties of ducks of many different species serenely and quietly resting during the day and obviously with little fear of man. I was particularly pleased to see that the Spotbill was found in good numbers. I had noticed in 1956 that

I had recorded it in only one district and said "it is the sort of bird which might disappear altogether without anyone being sure when the last bird was seen". The Peafowl and Jungle Fowl have also benefitted from the reduction in small game beats and we saw them plentifully in the Forest and in cultivation—and both the Red and Grey Jungle Fowl.

It was not until we were at Bharatpur and saw several family parties of Sarus Crane that I realised I had not seen any birds in Madhya Pradesh or Maharashtra though we travelled many miles in the rice growing districts of Bhandara, Balaghat and Chanda. Let us hope this was only a piece of bad luck on our part as the great expansion of irrigation and building of many new tanks should have increased their potential feeding grounds, but perhaps the abrupt end to the rains in Central India in September 1980 may have caused them to move to moister areas. Species which have obviously benefitted from the great expansion of irrigation both from reservoirs and wells have been the Egrets. We saw them everywhere even in Rajasthan and Delhi District.

Some other species which I looked forward to seeing we did not record, but as they were always rather irregular in distribution it may have no significance. For instance the Brahminy Kite was recorded by me as "resident and well-distributed throughout the State". I had always admired his rather tasteful brown and grey plumage and he was one of the birds I had looked forward to seeing. Another favourite bird was the Indian Crested Swift (*Hemiprocne coronata*) which I had recorded as "a very regularly distributed bird in nearly all the Forests of the State". It is a particularly graceful flyer and fascinating when it skims the water to drink, and one can admire a bird which has evolved such a miniature nest only large enough to hold one egg and



Teak forest



Sal forest

